

Jorge Luis Borges

Three Versions of Judas

There seemed a certainty in degradation. - T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

In Asia Minor or in Alexandria, in the second century of our faith (when Basilides was announcing that the cosmos was a rash and malevolent improvisation engineered by defective angels), Nils Runeberg might have directed, with a singular intellectual passion, one of the Gnostic conventicles. Dante would have destined him, perhaps, for a fiery sepulcher; his name might have augmented the catalogues of heresiarchs, between Saturnibus and Carpocrates; some fragment of his preaching, embellished with invective, might have been preserved in the apocryphal *Liber adversus omnes haereses* or might have perished when the firing of a monastic library consumed the last example of the *Syntagma*. Instead, God assigned him to the twentieth century, and to the university city of Lund. There, in 1904, he published the first edition of *Kristus och Judas*; there, in 1909, his masterpiece *Dem hemlige Fralsaren* appeared. (Of this last mentioned work there exists a German version, called *Der heimliche Heiland*, executed in 1912 by Emil Schering.)

Before undertaking an examination of the foregoing works, it is necessary to repeat that Nils Runeberg, a member of the National Evangelical Union, was deeply religious. In some salon in Paris, or even in Buenos Aires, a literary person might well rediscover Runeberg's theses; but these arguments, presented in such a setting, would seem like frivolous and idle exercises in irrelevance or blasphemy. To Runeberg they were the key with which to decipher a central mystery of theology; they were a matter of meditation and analysis, of historic and philologic controversy, of loftiness, of jubilation, and of terror. They justified, and destroyed, his life. Whoever peruses this essay should know that it states only Runeberg's conclusions, not his dialectic or his proof. Someone may observe that no doubt the conclusion preceded the "proofs" For who gives himself up to looking for proofs of something he does not believe in or the predication of which he does not care about?

The first edition of *Kristus och Judas* bears the following categorical epigraph, whose meaning, some years later, Nils Runeberg himself would monstrously dilate: Not one thing, but everything tradition attributes to Judas Iscariot is false. (De Quincey, 1857.) Preceded in his speculation by some German thinker, De Quincey opined that Judas had betrayed Jesus Christ in order to force him to declare his divinity and thus set off a vast rebellion against the yoke of Rome; Runeberg offers a metaphysical vindication. Skillfully, he begins by pointing out how superfluous was the act of Judas. He observes (as did Robertson) that in order to identify a master who daily preached in the synagogue and who performed miracles before gatherings of thousands, the treachery of an apostle is not necessary. This, nevertheless, occurred. To suppose an error in Scripture is intolerable; no less intolerable is it to admit that there was a single haphazard act in the most precious drama in the history of the world. Ergo, the treachery of Judas was not accidental; it was a predestined deed which has its mysterious place in the economy of the Redemption. Runeberg continues: The Word, when It

was made flesh, passed from ubiquity into space, from eternity into history, from blessedness without limit to mutation and death; in order to correspond to such a sacrifice it was necessary that a man, as representative of all men, make a suitable sacrifice. Judas Iscariot was that man. Judas, alone among the apostles, intuited the secret divinity and the terrible purpose of Jesus. The Word had lowered Himself to be mortal; Judas, the disciple of the Word, could lower himself to the role of informer (the worst transgression dishonor abides), and welcome the fire which can not be extinguished. The lower order is a mirror of the superior order, the forms of the earth correspond to the forms of the heavens; the stains on the skin are a map of the incorruptible constellations; Judas in some way reflects Jesus. Thus the thirty pieces of silver and the kiss; thus deliberate self-destruction, in order to deserve damnation all the more. In this manner did Nils Runeberg elucidate the enigma of Judas.

The theologians of all the confessions refuted him. Lars Peter Engstrom accused him of ignoring, or of confining to the past, the hypostatic union of the Divine Trinity; Axel Borelius charged him with renewing the heresy of the Docetists, who denied the humanity of Jesus; the sharp-edged bishop of Lund denounced him for contradicting the third verse of chapter twenty-two of the Gospel of St. Luke.

These various anathemas influenced Runeberg, who partially rewrote the disapproved book and modified his doctrine. He abandoned the terrain of theology to his adversaries and postulated oblique arguments of a moral order. He admitted that Jesus, "who could count on the considerable resources which Omnipotence offers," did not need to make use of a man to redeem all men. Later, he refuted those who affirm that we know nothing of the inexplicable traitor; we know, he said, that he was one of the apostles, one of those chosen to announce the Kingdom of Heaven, to cure the sick, to cleanse the leprous, to resurrect the dead, and to cast out demons (Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 9:1). A man whom the Redeemer has thus distinguished deserves from us the best interpretations of his deeds. To impute his crime to cupidity (as some have done, citing John 12:6) is to resign oneself to the most torpid motive force. Nils Runeberg proposes an opposite moving force: an extravagant and even limitless asceticism. The ascetic, for the greater glory of God, degrades and mortifies the flesh; Judas did the same with the spirit. He renounced honor, good, peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, as others, less heroically, renounced pleasure.<1> With a terrible lucidity he premeditated his offense.

In adultery, there is usually tenderness and self-sacrifice; in murder, courage; in profanation and blasphemy, a certain satanic splendor. Judas elected those offenses unvisited by any virtues: abuse of confidence (John 12 :6) and informing. He labored with gigantic humility; he thought himself unworthy to be good. Paul has written: Whoever glorifieth himself, let him glorify himself in God (I Corinthians 1:31); Judas sought Hell because the felicity of the Lord sufficed him. He thought that happiness, like good, is a divine attribute and not to be usurped by men.<2>

Many have discovered post factum that in the justifiable beginnings of Runeberg lies his extravagant end and that *Dem hemlige Fralsaren* is a mere perversion or exacerbation of Kristus och Judas. Toward the end of 1907, Runeberg finished and revised the manuscript text; almost two

years passed without his handing it to the printer. In October of 1909, the book appeared with a prologue (tepid to the point of being enigmatic) by the Danish Hebraist Erik Erfjord and bearing this perfidious epigraph: In the world he was, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not (John 1:10). The general argument is not complex, even if the conclusion is monstrous. God, argues Nils Runeberg, lowered himself to be a man for the redemption of the human race; it is reasonable to assume that the sacrifice offered by him was perfect, not invalidated or attenuated by any omission. To limit all that happened to the agony of one afternoon on the cross is blasphemous.<3> To affirm that he was a man and that he was incapable of sin contains a contradiction; the attributes of impeccabilitas and of humanitas are not compatible. Kemnitz admits that the Redeemer could feel fatigue, cold, confusion, hunger and thirst; it is reasonable to admit that he could also sin and be damned. The famous text He will sprout like a root in a dry soil; there is not good mien to him, nor beauty; despised of men and the least of them; a man of sorrow, and experienced in heartbreaks (Isaiah 53:2-3) is for many people a forecast of the Crucified in the hour of his death; for some (as for instance, Hans Lassen Martensen), it is a refutation of the beauty which the vulgar consensus attributes to Christ; for Runeberg, it is a precise prophecy, not of one moment, but of all the atrocious future, in time and eternity, of the Word made flesh. God became a man completely, a man to the point of infamy, a man to the point of being reprehensible - all the way to the abyss. In order to save us, He could have chosen any of the destinies which together weave the uncertain web of history; He could have been Alexander, or Pythagoras, or Rurik, or Jesus; He chose an infamous destiny: He was Judas.

In vain did the bookstores of Stockholm and Lund offer this revelation. The incredulous considered it, a priori, an insipid and laborious theological game; the theologians disdained it. Runeberg intuited from this universal indifference an almost miraculous confirmation. God had commanded this indifference; God did not wish His terrible secret propagated in the world. Runeberg understood that the hour had not yet come. He sensed ancient and divine curses converging upon him, he remembered Elijah and Moses, who covered their faces on the mountain top so as not to see God; he remembered Isaiah, who prostrated himself when his eyes saw That One whose glory fills the earth; Saul who was blinded on the road to Damascus; the rabbi Simon ben Azai, who saw Paradise and died; the famous soothsayer John of Viterbo, who went mad when he was able to see the Trinity; the Midrashim, abominating the impious who pronounce the Shem Hamephorash, the secret name of God. Wasn't he, perchance, guilty of this dark crime? Might not this be the blasphemy against the Spirit, the sin which will not be pardoned (Matthew 12:3)? Valerius Soranus died for having revealed the occult name of Rome; what infinite punishment would be his for having discovered and divulged the terrible name of God?

Intoxicated with insomnia and with vertiginous dialectic, Nils Runeberg wandered through the streets of Malmo, praying aloud that he be given the grace to share Hell with the Redeemer.

He died of the rupture of an aneurysm, the first day of March 1912. The writers on heresy, the heresiologists, will no doubt remember him; he added to the concept of the Son, which seemed exhausted, the complexities of calamity and evil.

<1> Borelius mockingly interrogates: Why did he not renounce to renounce? Why not renounce renouncing?

<2> Euclydes da Cunha, in a book ignored by Runeberg, notes that for the heresiarch of Canudos, Antonio Conselheiro, virtue was "a kind of impiety almost." An Argentine reader could recall analogous passages in the work of Almafuerte. Runeberg published, in the symbolist sheet Sju insegl, an assiduously descriptive poem, "The Secret Water": the first stanzas narrate the events of one tumultuous day; the last, the finding of a glacial pool; the poet suggests that the eternalness of this silent water checks our useless violence, and in some way allows and absolves it. The poem concludes in this way:

The water of the forest is still and felicitous, And we, we can be vicious and full of pain.

<3> Maurice Abramowicz observes: "Jesus, d'apres ce scandinave, a toujours le beau role; ses deboires, grace a la science des typographes, jouissent d'une reputation polyglotte; sa residence de trente-trois ans parmi les humains ne fut, en somme, qu'une villegiature." Erfjord, in the third appendix to the Christelige Dogmatik, refutes this passage. He writes that the crucifying of God has not ceased, for anything which has happened once in time is repeated ceaselessly through all eternity. Judas, now, continues to receive the pieces of silver; he continues to hurl the pieces of silver in the temple; he continues to knot the hangman's noose on the field of blood. (Erfjord, to justify this affirmation, invokes the last chapter of the first volume of the Vindication of Eternity, by Jaromir Hladik.)